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ABSTRACT

Right-wing protests in four suburban Illinois school districts are analyzed in this paper. Two questions are asked: How do administrative organizations respond to protest from extremist groups? Under what conditions do administrators acquiesce to protestors' demands? Three major findings emerged. The first was that the more uncertainty administrators experience in dealing with protest groups, the more likely they are to recommend actions satisfying protestors' demands. Related to administrators' sense of uncertainty are the nature of the issue, administrators' understanding of protestor motivation, the length of successful experience with the materials being challenged, confidence in the teaching and administrative staff, and experience with similar right-wing conflicts. Information gathering that linked protest to large organized protest groups only increased uncertainty because of the unpredictable nature of such groups. The second finding to emerge was that the more community meetings held about the issue, the less likely are administrators to recommend actions satisfying protestors' demands. More meetings offered opportunities for citizen defense of the challenged school policies. The final finding was that the more time and effort spent on the process of protest and response, the more likely are school officials to recommend actions satisfying protestors' demands. (Author/JM)

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Interest Groups, Social Movements, and the Bureaucracy: School Politics in Illinois

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"Short of sex, school issues touch most deeply the passions of suburbia."

—Vidich and Bensman, Small Town in Mass Society

This is a study of right-wing protests in four suburban school districts. The focus is on how public bureaucracies deal with demands from social movement groups. How do administrative organizations respond to disruption and protest from extremist groups? Under what conditions do administrators acquiesce to protestors' demands?[1] In attempting to answer these questions, three elements of the protest and response process receive attention: (1) administrators' responses to uncertainty; (2) the management of public discussion by school officials; and (3) the level of district organizational effort to resolve the conflict.

School district administrations, like other organizations, are characterized by routines, standard operating procedures, and attempts to follow rational decisionmaking norms (Allison, 1971; March and Simon, 1958; Weick, 1979). While schools as institutions change to adapt to changing environments (Rowan, 1982), administrators attempt to maintain control of their organizations and encourage adherence to rules and procedures. As we shall see, even minor disruptions of routines present school administrators with difficult situations requiring them to act in the face of great uncertainty. In order to handle crises brought about protest, managers first attempt to understand the situation so they can begin to make rough calculations about what protestors will do next and about how they should respond in a way which leads to a favorable outcome. In order to make those

estimates, administrators make judgments and interpretations of the situations which aid comprehension. They may compare the present situations to ones they have faced in the past, or they may ask about other administrators' experiences in similar crises. They rely on mental constructs (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974), or schemas (Axelrod, 1973), or construct accounts (Bennett. 1980) in order to interpret the crisis (Kiesler and Sproull, n.d.) and act in a way which comports with those interpretations.

Protests by local citizens present administrators with crisis situations filled with uncertainty and unpredictable futures to which they give meaning as they act to deal with the conflict. As one student of social movements suggests:

> In group conflict choices are invested with political meaning in addition to other meanings, both as (people) perceive them and as their opponents or uncommitted third parties perceive them. Both sides lack full and accurate information about each other; they have misconceptions about each other's strengths and weaknesses; and they respond to concrete problems and choices in complex ways, with a mixture of outrage, anger, puzzlement, and shrewd, informed calculation. (Oberschall, 1973, p. 25)

In the cases presented here, some aspects of the process of protest and response are explored in an effort to understand how meaning is created and assigned to these crisis situations and with what effects on the outcomes.[2]

Cases of Protest

Elmwood

Elmwood joined with other school districts and a non-profit research organization in the late 1960s to develop a comprehensive curriculum in sex education and family health for possible use in grades kindergarten through twelve. A local physician had been giving presentations about human sexual development to Parent Teacher Associations in the area; parents appeared interested in the subject and expressed support for a more comprehensive program in the schools. After spending two years consulting with national experts in the field of family health and sex education, as well as local educators, medical people, and clergy, the district had a curriculum ready for use and "testing" in the schools.

In preparing for the introduction of these new elements into the science and health curriculum, staff members of the research group scheduled presentations with district PTA groups in the spring 1969. In addition to supportive parents, a group of local residents attended who raised objections to the sex education program. Their objections took administrators and curriculum developers by surprise. From the beginning of the project, they had been sensitive to the potential problems of introducing a new sex education curriculum and had taken pains to involve local community members in the planning and development stages.

The first letter to the editor of the local newspaper was written by a member of the protesting group. An advertisement paid for by the American Opinion Library (a John Birch bookstore) asked "Do You Know What is Being Planned for Sex Education in the Schools?" and appeared in the same issue with a news article about the school board's plans to consider a summer school family living course at the next board meeting. The minutes of that meeting reported a large delegation of citizens attending the meeting to question the board on the proposed science course on human reproduction in one of the schools. Each successive board meeting from March through May was attended by large numbers of people interested in the sex education curriculum. Every weekly issue of the local newspaper during the three-month period carried news stories, letters to the editor, and advertisements paid for by either protestors or supporters of the sex education program in the Elmwood schools. A petition objecting to the introduction of the new curriculum was presented to the board of education. The Superintendent responded formally at a board meeting recommending that no changes be made in current instructional methods and materials.

By the end of May the Superintendent had appointed a steering committee responsible for selecting residents willing to serve on committees to review family living and sex education curriculum for elementrary grades, junior high school, and senior high school levels, respectively. Letters to the editor continued to appear in the local paper through July. Citizen advisory curriculum committees began meeting in November 1969 and continued working through 1970; their final report was submitted to the board of education in June 1971.

Controversy in the various committees focused on the federally-sponsored curriculum and its propriety and value orientation, particularly for use with high school students. One member of the senior high school reivew committee resigned the month before the final report was submitted to the board. Although she continued work on developing a curriculum based on that used for 15 years by one teacher in the high school, she cited problems with getting her viewpoint across in the face of "extremists" on the subcommittee who did not know the meaning of "compromise." In an informal note to the assistant superintendent she expressed even more clearly her frustration and anger with the actions of a few members of her committee who had been instrumental in recommending rejection of the new sex education curriculum.

The final recommendation of the advisory committee as a whole was to reject the new sex education curriculum developed in cooperation with other districts using federal funds. It further recommended that teachers could develop curriculum based on that used earlier by one high school teacher, and that teachers could continue student field trips to a local health center to view a program called "Life Begins." The importance of proper notification of parents before the presentation of units on sex education was underscored, with the acknowledgement that parents could remove their children from those sections of the health and science curriculum, if they wished. These recommendations were adopted by the school board without modification.

South View

In the fall semester 1980, the teachers in a South View school introduced a program into the curriculum which was to aid them in motiviating students to learn and take responsibility for discipline in the classroom. The principal and teachers of that school had attended a summer workshop in which they were trained in techniques to help

them be more effective teachers--especially in building a more cooperative relationship with students, which in turn, would have positive effects on student achievement. Announcements of the introduction of this innovative program were made in the school's newsletter to parents and at the fall open house.

In March 1981 the superintendent received several phone calls prompted by a notice in a local church bulletin which questioned the presence of the new program in the school. The superintendent called a public meeting at which the trainer and developer of the program made a presentation describing the program and its potential benefits to students. During that time, the Superintendent also called the Federal Bureau of Investigation, as well as the state department of education to find out about groups that might be involved in these kinds of challenges to school curriculum.

Protesting parents attended two school board meetings at which they raised objections to the new program. Their major criticism of the program was based on disagreement with the values of "secular humanism," which constituted a religion in the view of the complaining parents and communicated values to students which parents did not share. The school board listened to objections, requested and received research materials used by one protesting parent, and requested an evaluation of the program and recommendation by administrators.

During the summer, the principal wrote a memorandum to the superintendent recommending that the program be continued and expanded to others grade levels in the school. She cited improved discipline in classrooms as reported by teachers, and improved achievement scores for those students involved in the program to support her recommendation. The recommendations of the assistant superintendent and superintendent, however, suggested that the program be removed in its original format, although teachers might incorporate, at their discretion, those materials from the program cirriculum that they found useful. Finally, district administrators developed a written policy and procedure through which future objections and complaints must go before reaching school officials. The School board formally adopted the administration's recommendations in October 1981, after notifying protesting parents of the date and time of the meeting at which board action on the status of the program was to be taken.

Sun Valley

At about the same time that parents were raising objections in South View, administrators in Sun Valley were faced with protests over textbooks proposed for use in their district. After review of alternative texts, the science curriculum committee in the district proposed adoption of a sex education textbook in an effort to update their offerings. As is their usual procedure, the board of education placed about 40 textbooks, manuals, and supplementary texts on display in the public library and in the administration building for public perusal and announced their intention to consider adoption of those texts at their next monthly meeting.

A few days before the February board meeting, a news story reported that some parents, unhappy with the sex education text being considered, were meeting to organize a protest at the next board meeting. Three days later about 100 people attended that meeting, many voicing complaints which the board noted. The board then moved to adopt all of the texts and materials except two--a sex education textbook and a civics text. Members of the board voted to continue displaying the controversial texts, taking the objectons under advisement for a month and reviewing the texts with the intent of voting on them at the next board meeting.

During the following month news articles and letters to the editor appeared in the local newspaper--four letters objecting to the texts for various reasons, one letter supporting the schools and the sex education text.

At the school board meeting in March, board members voted uanimously to retain the two textbooks in question and to offer two sections of health education--one with the sex education textbook, the other without it, provided at least 15 students signed up for the alternative offering. In discussing the issue, one board member reported that letters to the board on this issue exceeded those received for any other issue, including teachers' strikes, and the letters supporting the sex education and civics textbooks outnumbered those opposed.

Riverdale

In February 1982, several parents in Riverdale visited their childrens' school to raise objections to portions of

the music curriculum in the junior high school. They were particulary concerned about the use of rock music by the music teacher and were not satisfied by their talks with the teacher and building principal. A formal complaint was then brought before the superintendent, who created an advisory committee composed of parents, teachers, and chaired by the assistant superintendent. Six protesting parents presented their objection to the advisory council at the end of February. Three days later, news stories about the hearing were carried in three local newspapers. Parents and students who supported the music curriculum and the music teacher requested that they be able to present their side of the issue to the superintendent's council. In early March about 120 people attended, many of them making statements in support of the curriculum, the teacher, and the schools in general.

In the next few days four additional articles appeared in local newspapers, as well as a letter to the editor supporting the music program. The week after the second hearing, the advisory council met to unanimously recommend keeping the music program as currently offered. The following week the superintendent announced that, on the basis of the council's recommendation, the district would retain the unit on rock music in the curriculum, adding that parents have the option of withdrawing their children from offensive portions of the curriculum if they so choose.

News articles and editorials, as well as letters to the editor continued to appear after the superintendent's announcement. The last public discussion appeared in late April in the form of a "Guest Essay" in one local paper signed by 11 individuals opposing presentation of rock music in the music curriculum, and two letters to the editor, one commenting on possible damage to the teacher involved. Since then, the superintendent has received one request for the materials used in the music curriculum and for a copy of the sex education curriculum used in the junior high school. His letter respoonding to the request listed the prices of the books used in the two courses, if the invidividual wished to purchase them. Two months after sending that letter he had heard nothing more.

As the brief descriptions of these four cases indicate, school administrations vary in their responses to protests from right-wing groups. In two of the situations, the textbooks and curriculum in

question were retained with little or no modification; in the other two, the challenged curriculum or program was removed from the formal offerings in the schools. In attempting to account for the variation in outcomes, three elements in the process of responding to challenges are discussed: 1) administrators' responses to uncertainity; 2) the management of public discussion, and 3) the level of administrative effort in resolving the conflict.

Administrators' Responses to Uncertainty

If we assume a force model of political pressure and response (Truman, 1965), superintendents' responses to protests seem to conform to our expectations about how public officials respond to their constituents. If administrators suspected that a right-wing group had a role in initiating or aiding the parents who were objecting, as they did in Elmwood and South View, superintendents did not seem to be willing to risk the possibility of public confrontation and met parents' demands . If, on the other hand, administrators believed that the matter was simply one where a few parents were concerned about their children's education, as in the Riverdale case, but were not connected to outside groups, then they tended to recommend that the objectionable materials be retained and the protesting parents be encouraged to remove their children from that portion of the course in which the curriculum appeared. Administrators calculate that they can afford to turn down the request, confident that the issues will not explode into a community conflict of greater proportions, if they believe that the situation is one of a few parents voicing concerns unaided and unsupported by a larger group.

It is in administrators' explanations and interpretations of events that we find a paradox that leads to further exploration of administrators' perceptions of these situations. In cases where the district administration stood firm in the face of a challenge, superintendents spoke of being open and responsive to all requests; parents and citizens should have a say in what is taught and what values should be transmitted to their children. As two administrators put it, "They're paying the taxes." The legitimacy of parents' demands was not questioned, nor was their sincerity or concern for their children.

A superintendent who had not recommended any changes in curriculum in the face of public parent objections had this to say about the situation:

> ....I take every concern as a legitimate concern even though personally I think it's way out. Personally I may find it distasteful, (but) I take it as a legitimate concern and give it what I feel is as fair and objective a hearing as can be given and would very honestly go against my own personal beliefs on things if I felt the community felt that that's the way it should go. . . .I really feel that the schools belong to the community and that it will respond to input from the community. When I try to operate that way, I really don't feel uncomfortable in situations of this nature.

The contrast, where superintendents had linked a few parents to extremist groups like the John Birch Society, the Eagle Forum, the Moral Majority, or the Christian Crusade, administrators did not see citizens' complaints and requests for involvement as legitimate. Their discussion of the incident included references to the dangers of letting extremist groups, such as the ones they were dealing with in these situations, have any say in education and curriculum policymaking. When asked "What do you think the appropriate role would

be for these kinds of groups in educational policymaking?" one superintendent replied:

> That is kind of a tough question. There is a big push right now for public involvement in education and I can go along with that. As long as it doesn't become too powerful in one particular thing. Off hand, this particular type group (extremist right-wing) I would have to say 'No', they would have no place in there. I'm looking at a broader spectrum. I would have to say right now in my personal opinion for this group I would say "No, no way at all."

Yet it was in the face of opposition from these groups, "something lurking in the dark out there," as one superintendent described them, that school administrators and boards were likely to acquiesce to demands for removal of instruction materials.

Others have noted a similar phenomenon among administrators implementing court-ordered desegregation in schools (Muir, 1973). Where administrators' attitudes did not change, but their behavior did, justifications for their actions included references to the overwhelming force outside of the district which compelled them to change their behavior. In the case of acquiesence to right-wing groups, administrators compared them to the Ku Klux Klan and to Nazis, associating the groups in their school districts with a large and evil force which was frightening and overwhelming. They further suggested that school boards and administrators should not cave in to the demands of these groups, that to do so would be to bow to the preferences of a few. As one superintendent put it:

> I use the example always of Hitler, of how he was able to persuade so many millions of people to his way of what he wanted or thought was best. You always have groups who have stronger beliefs, in whatever it would be--Ku Klux Klan, whatever. You are always going to have that. What the danger is (is) when they start--I'll use the term--'muscling in' in areas where they don't belong. . .Of course the way to do it always is with the young children. . . So that is where I see the danger and if there are people there to say, 'Wait

> a minute, I'll listen to you but if I don't believe you, don't force it on me.' If those people are no longer there it just goes on and on.

Protest and Uncertainty

At this preliminary stage, we might suggest that it is not the legitimacy of the demands which superintendents attend to in these cases, but to the potential for irrational, spontaneous disruption by extremist groups about whom they know little, but whom they have labelled as potentially overwhelming evil forces. One administrator remembered with some discomfort an incident he had been involved in over ten years ago. As he recalled the situation, a few parents had raised questions about what moral values teachers were imparting to their children, and had raised their objections in a very disruptive fashion.

> It's very shot-gunny. It's very spontaneous. You walk into your office and you don't know what's going to happen, from where, and who's going to be on the phone next. . . .What they (the teachers) don't realize is that every one of us is vulnerable. The analogy I use is: they crucified Jesus Christ, you know. No matter how virtuous you are, you're in line just like everybody else.

Not only are the disruptions spontaneous, but the charges seem irrational and unexpected, even virtuous people do not escape being challenged. Suddenly, even actions which had been successful--even laudatory--in teaching children are seriously questioned and labelled as deviant by parents.

As Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward have suggested in another context (1979), protest groups have enjoyed the greatest successes when they have presented officials with disruption and protest, with uncertain futures with which government agencies have had to contend.

In the face of those disruptions, administrators have acquiesced, at least in part, to group demands. While Piven and Cloward's emphasis is on the power of disruption in gaining the attention of public officials, the reactions of public school administrators in these situations point to the sense of uncertainty and dismay at what the next moment may bring. One assistant superintendent explained:

> She (one parent) took me completely off-base. . . . My position with her was 'I am a building principal (in a large school of 2300 students) and I've got more important things to do.' And that was a mistake. . . . There were a lot of surprises, because these people as a group, believe they are being ethical. By my ethical standards, they are not. . . .
>
> They came into the building, when the building was closed, took pictures of teachers' bulletin boards, of particular things on bulletin boards. I remember there was a picture from Life magazine. . . and it showed a picture of a young lady kicking her leg up in the air, in a collage of things. That was picked out and blown up in our local newspaper. . . They do not behave ethically, the way I would think.

These protesting parents did get the attention of this school administrator, as they have obtained the attention of many public administrators recently. But the successful use of disruption may not be due to the potential for social disorder and unrest in these suburban communities, nor even to the annoyance and aggravation which administrators feel when forced to deal with demands and events outside of their routines.

One administrator's experience points to the lack of familiarity and lack of knowledge about future outcomes as the most difficult for administrators to cope with in these situations.

> I guess I've become a little calloused (after dealing with four different protests over the past 12 years). After you do something enough times it becomes easier. It's like jumping off a high dive. The first time, I guess, it's a little traumatic. After you've accomplished it a few times, it becomes less traumatic and more routine.

In this district's most recent experience with right-wing groups, the school administration remained firm in its recommendation of a sex education text, which the school board subsequently adopted. In contrast, as reported by this administrator, the first episode a decade ago had resulted in a vote of confidence in the teachers, but also in the "voluntary removal" of instructional materials which had been the object of controversy.

Interpretation and Information

In analyzing the cases and interviews with administrators, it appears that administrators' perceptions of the people and groups with which they are dealing account for at least part of their particular responses and recommendations for action. To begin to understand the process by which school administrators come to understand right-wing demands, we turn to the literature on social cognition and particularly to recent formulations of the process of administrators' responses to crises.[3]

One theory of managerial problem sensing suggests that there are three stages to the process: noticing; interpreting; and incorporating.

> During noticing, managers must distinguish a potentially problematic stimulus from the myriad stimuli available to them. During interpretation, they must construct or assign meaning to the stimulus. During incorporating, they must remember the interpretation and associate it with other appropriate cognitions. (Kiesler abnd Sproull, n.d.)

In protest situations, school administrators seem to have little difficulty in noticing the program. Protestors either bring their complaints through the channels and procedures of the district or

attend board meetings in large enough numbers to be noticed. Although there is some variation in the tactics used by extremist groups, the most common methods of gaining the attention of school boards and administrators is through group attendance at board meetings, large numbers of telephone calls to district administrators, and letters to editors of local newspapers.

The difficulty for administrators emerges in the process of interpreting the demands, and may also be the key to understanding the apparent discrepancy between actions and justifications noted earlier. In two cases in which administrators stood firm in the face of demands, school officials had little difficulty interpreting and understanding the demands being made. In Sun Valley, administrators had successfully dealt with protest situations before, had developed an adequate interpretation of the group's demands and motivations which allowed them to cope with the situation satisfactorily. In the case of protest over use of rock music, both the superintendent and assistant superintendent admitted that they, too, disliked rock music but did not have any particular position on its use in the classroom.

> I really don't think there are that many things in life that are right or wrong. Rock music is an example. I don't think rock music is right; I don't think it's wrong. Personally I don't care for it. If I had my choice of listening to it, I wouldn't listen to it. I just don't like the beat. But that's not to say that my personal taste is what should prevail.

This superintendent understood why parents might complain about the use of rock music; he did not particularly care for that kind of music himself and appeared to be sympathetic to the six parents' objection. The idea of disliking rock music was not at all foreign to

him; he did not have to look for a context, a way of understanding, these demands which required searching for more information about either the individuals raising objectons, or about the nature of the arguments they were presenting. Even though the parents, in their presentation to the curriculum advisory board, "explained their criticisms and concerns and (they) went through the whole rigamarole about it being anti-God , anti-Christian, breaking down the morality, leading kids to drugs, sex," administrators in this situation could understand the motivation of the complainants; they could interpret the arguments in a way which comported with their own sensibilities and did not need to look further for information to aid in interpreting the incident.

In situations where administrators have difficulty interpreting objections from parents, they seek information about those individuals and their beliefs in an effort to place them and their arguments in a context that makes sense. Administrators turned to several sources for information. In one instance, school board members, after hearing a presentation from a parent, asked for and received the materials she had used in her research of school curriculum; these contained leaflets and pamphlets from Christian Crusade, Eagle Forum, and Mel and Norma Gabler, activists familiar in right-wing education circles. A teacher in one district attended a public meeting of a local Moral Majority group and gathered literature there which she passed on to the superintendent. In the same district, the superintendent contacted the Federal Bureau of Investigation, unsuccessfully, to get information about the groups he thought were involved in his community; he did receive material from the state department of education about the

Eagle Forum and their goals for education. In another case, news media representatives covering the protest gave the superintendent information about a "neo-Nazi" group outside of the district which had communicated its support for the protesting parents.

In each case, articles in magazines, newspapers, and assorted pamphlets about organizations of right-wing movements made their way into files of administrators; phrases in these material were matched with statements made by the protestors in discussions and public hearings. As one assistant superintendent said, when asked how he knew that the complaining parerts were part of the ultra-right, "You can read the script." By associating the phrases and terms used by protestors, like "secular humanism," "pro-life," and references to the Hatch amendment, school administrators placed individuals in these incidents in a context which made sense to them. No longer were the protestors seen as individual parents, tax-payers supporting the schools, who had a legitimate right to raise concerns and problems about the schools. In the process of interpreting the actions and statements of these parents, administrators could make sense of what appeared at first to be incomprehensible by associating the protestors with right-wing groups.

The irony is that by attempting to make sense of the objections to curriculum, school officials collected information which encouraged them to interpret these protests as part of a movement much larger than a simple complaint in a single school district. Rather than responding to the individuals as if to a few concerned parents, administrators interpreted the situation as one in which they must defend "our pluralistic political system" against the ravages of a monolithic

totalitarian social movement. On the one hand, their initial reponse is to make sure these kinds of people do not "muscle in" and begin to dictate what values should be taught in the schools. On the other hand, if administrators feel that they are dealing with a powerful, dangerous right-wing movement of national proportions, then modifying small parts of the curriculum, removing a single book from the school library, or dropping a textbook from instructional materials may seem like a small price to pay in order to keep the situation under control and keep those dangerous and powerful people out of the schools. The need for information to make a satisfying interpretation of protestors' public statements, where these statements are not immediately comprehensible, leads administrators, in the end, to connect a few individuals in their communities with symbols of political evil in our society--Hitler and the Nazis. Where superintendents attempt to dispel ambiguity and uncertainty, they end up creating a situation of fear and even greater uncertainty.

Sources of administrative certainty

Many factors may contribute to a superintendent's level of confidence in the face of group protest and disruption. In the cases presented here, three factors stand out as possible contributors to administrators' sense of certainty: 1) familiarity with the challenged instructional materials; 2) confidence in staff and teacher abilities; and 3) previous experience with protest groups. These may mitigate somewhat the effects of non-routine demands from external groups and affect the final resolution of the conflict.

In the early case in Elmwood of a challenge to the sex education curriculum, the portion of the sex education curriculum which was being introduced for the first time as an innovation emerging from a federally-sponsored program was removed. The curriculum which remained had been developed and used by a single member of the teaching staff for 15 years. Likewise, in the case where the use of rock music was challenged, that curriculum had been developed by a single teacher and had been used for eight years before the challenge was brought to the school administration. In both cases the challenged materials had been developed by teachers who were regarded as extremely successful, and in one case, very popular with students. In contrast, in South View where a recently introduced pilot program to motivate children was challenged by parents, the school board and administration recommended that the formal program be discontinued. Teachers could incorporate parts of the program into their lesson plans, at their discretion, but it did not remain as a formal part of the curriculum, nor was it expanded and introduced at other grade levels, as the teachers and building principal had recommended.

We might expect to find in other situations that the more embedded in the curriculum the program or textbook, that is, the more it appears to be an integral part of the basal curriculum, the more likely the materials will be retained. We would expect this because organizations develop routines, ways of doing things, standard operating procedures, in curriculum and subject matter no less than in administrative procedures, which are difficult to change (Allison, 1973; Cyert and March, 1963; Weick, 1979). Individual teachers may change and develop parts of the curriculum from one year to the next,

but we would expect them to be marginal changes (Lindblom, 1958). While it is not clear what it is about being integrated into the curriculum that makes it harder to remove those instructional materials, it may not be just a matter of routine and habit which makes it difficult to dislodge them. The longer the materials have been used in the school or district without complaint, the more confident teachers and administrators may be in justifying their use. They can point to a history of teaching with these materials without challenges from parents and may have built up a record of satisfactory experience with them. Familiarity with the materials--whether sex education curriculum and texts or social studies materials--and their incorporation into teaching routines without complaints from parents, then, may build confidence among teachers and administrators in the face of challenges from community members.

A third source of confidence is the district's previous experience with similar challenges. In two districts which had been the scene of protests by right-wing groups about ten years ago, administrators had learned from those experiences, were familiar with the process of protest, public discussion, and resolution. They felt prepared. While in both cases, school administrators had acquiesced to some demands made in early protests, in successive challenges, no policies or practices were changed in response to right-wing demands. In Sun Valley, for example, the most recent protest and challenge to materials once again constituted a disruption of usual routines, but district administrators had developed written procedures to aid them in dealing with these situations. Although the procedure was time-consuming and seemed annoying and unfortunate to both the assistant superintendent

and superintendent, the episode was not fraught with the same distress that they expressed about the first incident. For those who have faced these situations in the past, the protest and its resolution had been routinized--"You've lived through it and you know how to approach it."

Management of public discussion

Although the process by which groups and school officials engage in public discussion of controversial matters varies from district to district, a general pattern or natural history of protest and reponse does emerge. First, there are usually preliminary contacts betweer protesting individuals and school teachers and administrators, either through telephone calls to the superintendent or through articles in local newspapers. In two cases, district administrators referred individuals to the teachers or building principals involved, suggesting that if parents were not satisfied after discussion with those using the materials, the parent could return with a formal complaint which might eventually be carried to the school board. In Elmwood a group of parents attended a PTA meeting at which a proposed sex education curriculum was presented and raised objections. In a fourth case, a news article in the local paper reported that parents were meeting before an upcoming school board meeting to organize protest to a proposed sex education textbook.

The next phase of the process includes two kinds of activities. The first is a series of public hearings or school board meetings at which protesting parents make presentations. These vary in format, orderliness, and number, but where administrators are successful in resisting challenges, the presentations follow a "pendulum" pattern, as

one administrator termed it. First, statements are made by those objecting to particular instructional materials--usually an identifiable unit in the curriculum, or a particular textbook or set of textbooks and usually having to do with sex education or social studies. Second, those who support either the particular programs or the school administration make statements. According to administrators in every case, these comments and statements of support outnumber the protestors substantially. In one case protestors accounted for about 10% of the audience, in another about 40%. In another district, the complaining parents numbered six while those turning out to a second meeting to show support numbered 120. Even when pressed by protestors to respond, school officials usually do not attempt to answer questions or demands at the initial session. They postpone their reponse and vote until a later public meeting, after receiving advice and recommendations from district administrators. Finally, there is a meeting at which the board presents its decision on the issue.

At the time that public hearings take place, debate continues in news articles and, most important, in letters to the editor in local newspaper. The numbers of letters ranged from 1 to 7 in a single issue of a local community newspaper. In one case, advertisements were taken out by each side in order to rally support. In three cases letters continued to appear after the board announced its decision.

Administrators expressed ambivalence about holding public hearings on curriculum matters. In two cases where school officials did not meet right-wing demands, however, a series of formal public hearings was held, in those where administrators met some of the demands of

protestors, one district heard statements during the course of a regular school board meeting, the other held no formal hearings, although it did hear from citizens during the course of several school board meetings. Ambivalence on the part of administrators seemed to stem from a desire to contain the conflict and to prevent right-wing groups from publicizing their cause in a legitimate forum. They did not want to risk the possible persuasion of others in the community to the protestors' side. This is not an unreasonable fear. Although there is disagreement about the utility of public hearings in coopting protest, some researcher have suggested that movement groups have been able to use them to exert some influence over policymaking (Sabatier, 1975).

What some school officials could not foresee was what one assistant superintendent termed a "pendulum" of public opinion emerging in the course of public testimony. As this administrator described the process:

> The pendulum starts swinging one way and you get all sorts of textbook criticism, if you wish, and as the public becomes more aware, then the pendulum starts swinging back toward the center. . . .Inevitably at the last public hearing, more and more of the pros start appearing. . . .I've experience that about three time now.

At first, right-wing groups mobilized people who were dissatisfied with the schools or the treatment of their children, for one reason or another; many of these people may not have been dedicated to a particular cause or ideology, but were irritated by the actions of a particular teacher or administrator. Initially, it appeared that ultra-right ideologues were gaining adherents and representing a substantial portion of community sentiment. As their numbers grew and

as their objections were made public, however, those who supported the schools, which seemed to be a majority in the cases discussed here, began to turn out for public meetings and lend their support to the teachers and school officials in their communities. In three cases, a majority supporting school policy attended public meetings which provided a justification for overruling the minority right-wing demands. As one administrator put it, "I let the parents fight it out."

In Elmwood, a different method of community participation was used. As noted in the brief description of this case, rather than holding public hearings, administrators managed the public discussion by appointing a committee, which, in turn, appointed several committees to review the proposed sex education materials. Four committees comprised of 56 members, in all, spent 18 months reading materials, viewing films, reviewing curriculum outlines and goals, and writing reports of their findings and recommendation. The process was lengthy and, in at least one committee, somewhat conflictual. As reported in the case description, one member resigned because she could not work with "extremists." Right-wing members were represented on these committees and were successful in making their opinions known. In the end, their views prevailed for the most part; the sex education materials developed for introduction into grades kindergarten through twelve were not incorporated for classroom use. A less well-developed curriculum, developed by one teacher was resurrected and left to individual teachers to update and use at their discretion.

A cursory reading of the minutes of advisory committee meetings

suggests that, in one committee, two or three members with strong right-wing views were able to manage the meetings so that their recommendations were adopted. Their success appears to be due partly to sheer abundance of attention to the committee's business--one right-wing advocate attended more meetings that any other member of that committee (cf. Weiner, 1979)--partly to control over the written minutes of meetings, and partly to obtaining strategic assignments in reviewing the proposed curriculum. In this case, protestors were permitted access to decisionmaking in the district through an ad hoc advisory committee. Their access to curriculum materials and their ability to become experts in the area, through division of committee labor and assignments, and in part, because of their ability to devote a great deal of time to the issue, resulted in the adoption of their recommendations and success in preventing the incorporation of a new sex education curriculum into the district schools.[4]

Organizational Effort

Finally, the amount of time and resources which school administrators devote to managing the conflict situation may contribute to variations in outcomes. The longer the time spent and the higher the level of effort in dealing with the crisis brought about by right-wing protests, the more likely school officials were to acquiesce to group demands. In Elmwood, resolution of the conflict took 28 months, including the time devoted to advisory committee meetings; in South View it took about 8 months. In both Riverdale and Sun Valley the process of initial protest, public hearings and recommendations by the school board took 2 to 3 months. Officials in those two districts did not remove objectionable materials, while in

Elmwood and South View substantial changes were made in the curriculum in response to right-wing demands. We might expect to find in other cases, as well, that the greater the time, attention, and resources devoted to resolution of these conflicts brought on by ultra-right conservative groups, the more important the issue appears to school admistrators, and the more important and influential they may think the protesting groups. To justify the expenditure of effort, officials are likely to credit the protestors with influence and legitimacy, so much indeed, that district policy is changed in repsonse to their demands.

Even where school districts made no major changes in curriculum and use of teaching materials but spent some time and effort resisting challenges, administrators reported subtle changes in their approach to matters of classroom teaching and textbook adoption. In Sun Valley where the school administration had had several experiences with right-wing groups, the board added an alternative unit to the health course to be taught without the challenged textbook. Moreover, an administrator in this district said,

> Truthfully, we always ask ourselves the question, "Is this book going to be a contested book. . .which is a subtle part of this activity which in my own reading, is the thing that can hurt the most. Where was it in Virginia. . . where they accomplished what they (right-wing groups) wanted because they started cutting books out. Our approach is, this book is probably going to be contested; can we defend it educationally?. . . If we say, "yes we can," then we will put it on public display , but aware that it could be contested.

Likewise, in the Riverdale district, where the music curriculum remained intact despite parent challenges, the superintendent suggested,

> I think she (the teacher involved) is using a little more discretion, but the program has not been modified. She was taking a lot of songs from the music popular with kids and not paying as much attention to the words as she probably should have, especially working with kids this age. We advised her of that.

School officials and teachers, then, do sense a change in the way they do things, even in districts where materials and programs have been retained.

Conclusion

In summarizing the observations of school administrators' responses to protest by right-wing groups in four districts, I suggest that a major element of the process of group protest and administrative response is administrative uncertainty about both the source and cause of the challenge, as well as about the probable outcome of the conflict. We might expect, then, that:

> (1) The more uncertainty administrators experience in dealing with protest groups, the more likely they are to recommend modifications in policy which satisfy protestors' demands.

Several factors may contribute to this sense of uncertainty. So far, we have noted such things as: the nature of the issue raised and whether administrators immediately understand the motivations of the protesting parents; the degree of familiarity and length of successful experience with the materials in question; the level of confidence in teaching and administrative staff; and, previous experience with similar conflicts initated by right-wing protestors. We also noted that the degree of uncertainty about the source of the protest led to information-gathering efforts to reduce uncertainty. The information collected, however, tended to introduce fear and, in that way,

heighten uncertainty because it led to an association of the protestors with social movements of large proportions and potentially dangerous, unpredictable, and violent nature.

The process of protest, community mobilization, and public discussion also appears to contribute to variations in the outcomes of these situations. From the cases discussed here we might expect that:

> (2) The greater the number of public community meetings about the issue held by school officials, the less likely they are to recommend modifications in policy which satisfy protestors' demands.

While initial public hearings appeared to favor those challenging curriculum policy, successive meetings offered opportunities for those who supported the schools to hear about the protest and to mobilize people and resources to defend school policies. This "pendulum" of protest, however may have limits. The nature of a pendulum may be to swing right and then left, but the metaphor leads us to suggest that the pendulum may also swing back to the right. In the Elmwood case, the process of public discussion in school board meetings did lead to a show of support for school officials, but the continuation of the conflict in the less overtly conflictual and public arena of advisory committee meetings seemed to favor those who disagreed with school policy on sex education programs. This process of citizen participation in education decisionmaking warrants more detailed analysis to understand better the dynamic of the process.

For now, however, a final expectation may be formulated:

> (3) The more time and effort spent on the process of protest and response, the more likely are school officials to recommend modifications in policy which satisfy protestors' demands.

I suggest that this happens, in part, because administrators may gauge the importance of issues, the level of commitment of protestors, and the potential for future such protests by the amount of time that citizens and administrators invest in the resolution of the conflict at hand. The more time and effort devoted to the present conflict, the more likely another such challenge may occur in the future. Since administrators' prefer to avoid such potential conflicts, they may acquiesce to present demands hoping to prevent future protests.

Administrators' perceptions of the centrality of the issue to the general administration of the district may also contribute to their willingness to spend time on the issue in the future. While administrators may feel comfortable spending a lot of time on important issues like school finance, building closings, collective bargaining with teachers, and the like, hours spent in resolving conflicts about relatively minor issues may seem wasteful. If officials believe the issue to be relatively unimportant (the adoption of a single textbook, changes in a two-week unit on sex education in a course at one grade level), and they devote a great deal of time to resolving the conflict, they are not likely to want to provoke an outcry on the same issue in the future. One assistant superintendent described these issues as "frivolous," matters that were not at the heart of school administration or governmental policymaking in general. Another put it this way:

> We spent one Christmas vacation of 1969 putting together this document which is about 20 or 30 pages to answer some questions one guy was asking. So we were spending a heck of a lot of time and a lot of effort and energy. So for those reasons we have just kind of said to heck with that whole noise. If the public wants it (sex education), they will demand it and then we are in a position to do it. Until that time we will do other things--we'll teach reading, writing,

> and arithmetic. . . All of the other things that we are doing--there are many in this district--superior things, just kind of stand still or go by the board. Or you think, "well, what the heck, what's the motivation to really make this a superior district?" It is just defeating in that respect.

This paper has focused on three aspects of the process of school administration response to right-wing protests in four cases. Administrators' sense of uncertainty, the "pendulum" of public support, and the level of organizational effort devoted to resolving the conflict are major factors which may begin to account for variations in administrative response to protests by contemporary social movements.

Notes

1. The response of government officials to protest movements has received attention, of course (Gamson, 1975; Fainstein and Fainstein, 1974; Piven and Cloward, 1979; Sabatier, 1975), but most research on official response has focused on the relationships between stable, institutionalized interest groups and governmental bureaucracies (see, for example, Edelman, 1964; Lowi, 1979; McConnell, 1966).

In addition, the literature on social movements has treated their origins, evolution, maintenance, and transformation into interest groups (Gusfield, 1970; Handler, 1978; Heberle, 1951; Messinger, 1955; Oberschall, 1973; Smelser, 1963; Tilly, 1978; Turner and Killian (eds.), 1972). Political scientists have examined, with particular interest, the uses of protest in political and social movements in the United States to understand the conditions which contribute to its use (Eiseinger, 1973), its role in movement cohesion and organizational maintenance (Wilson, 1961; Walker, 1963), as well as its use as a resource in achieving movement goals (Gamson, 1975; Lipsky, 1968). Recent discussions, in fact, have suggested that political movements with low resources have been most successful when they have used the threat of disruption and social disorder in presenting their claims to government agencies (Piven and Cloward, 1979).

2. Data for this study were collected from local newspaper accounts, interviews with nine school administrators, and documents from school district files. Interviews took place in June and July 1982. To preserve anonymity the names of the communities have been changed.

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3. Sara Kiesler and Lee Sproull have thoroughly reviewed much of the literature in the field, a task beyond the scope of this paper, and applied it to the special case of how managers come to know that a problem exits. See their excellent presentation, "Managerial Response to changing Environments: Perspectives on Problem Sensing from Social Cognition," Unpublished paper, Carnegie-Mellon University, no date.

4. The Elmwood case seems to resemble Philip Selznick's classic study of informal cooptation of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) by local farm groups in the state (TVA and the Grass Roots, Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1949). Attempts to formally coopt local community members in order to set up communication channels with those at the local level, as well as to forestall possible disruption of a new federal program, resulted in an unintentional shift in the goals of the TVA. Local farm groups were able to informally coopt the TVA through their participation on local advisory boards. Although the TVA was able to implement several major programs like the electrification program, its conservation goals were not met because of lack of support from relatively powerful groups in the area.

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